

REPORT ON BUSINESS

Women facing 'the last locker room'

Commission-based sales career presents barriers, female agents say

BY TERENCE BELFORD

When Karen Barry decided in 1991 to make a career selling commercial real estate, she says it was almost like entering a hostile foreign land. At the Toronto brokerage where she worked, there were only three female agents and she felt they were not encouraged.

"The men around me made it clear they thought I should just go home," she says. "Commercial real estate was a man's world."

Ms. Barry persevered. She bought a year's worth of nylon, brown bagged her lunch, worked three nights a week as a waitress to supplement an almost non-existent income and attended night school at York University twice a week for five years to gain her Accredited Appraiser Canadian Institute, a designation that allows the holder to appraise a wide range of properties.

Today Ms. Barry is associate vice-president of investment at Royal LePage Commercial Inc. in Calgary and one of the company's top producers. But while almost every other facet of commercial real estate now embraces women, the commission-based sector of the brokerage industry remains a hold-out, she says.

"It is the last locker room. In my own field, which is investment sales, there are only five women involved right across Canada," she says. "There is still not a lot of opportunity for women in the commission-based sector. It is the last bastion of male domination."

The walls of that last bastion may be crumbling, however.

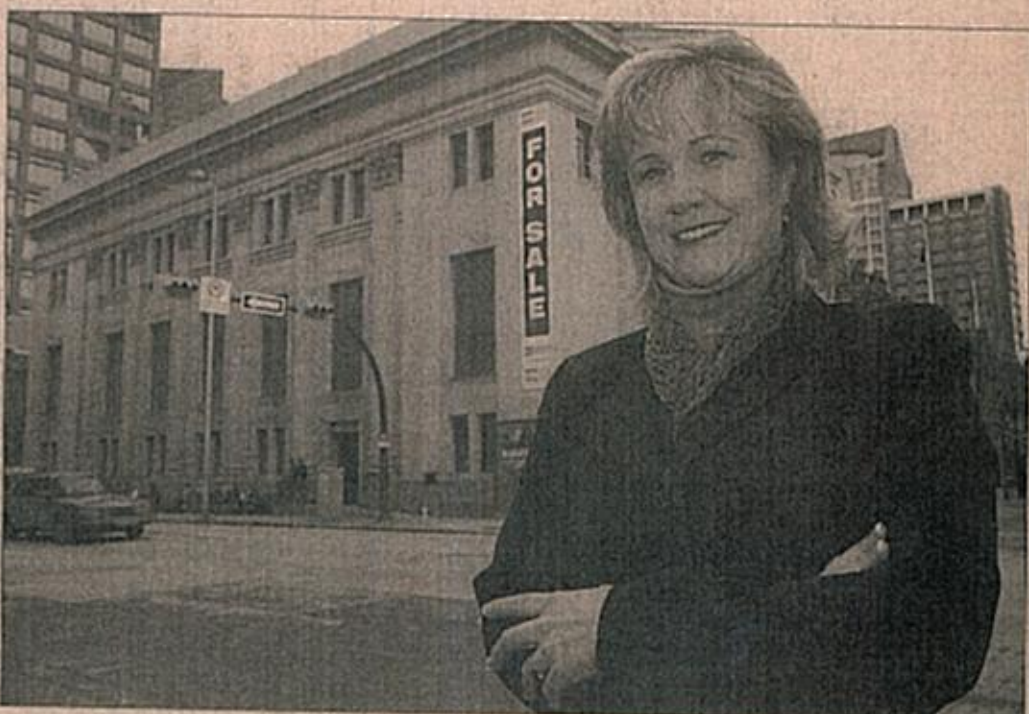
"We have made huge gains in the past 10 to 15 years," says Mary Mowbray, a vice-president at Colliers International and president of the Toronto chapter of Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW). "Unfortunately, one of the exceptions is the commercial brokerage area."

The problem, she says, starts from the top.

"All issue are their (top managers') hiring policies. They still do hip-pocket hiring. If attitudes at the top don't change, there is nothing to drive the hiring of qualified women."

Ms. Mowbray's criticism holds merit, says Blake Hutchison, president of the Canadian operations of CB Richard Ellis Ltd., which has about 500 employees in offices across Canada.

"Worldwide, we employ 20,000 people and this year we created a list of six objectives to drive the company forward. One of them is to increase diversity," Mr. Hutchison



Karen Barry of Royal LePage Commercial, in front of a former Bank of Montreal building, one of her downtown Calgary properties.



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Blake Hutchison, president of Canadian operations of CB Richard Ellis Ltd.

says. "That means not just more women but a greater mix of ethnic, racial and cultural views."

Besides, he adds, diversity just makes good business sense. Real estate sales and management has shifted away from lone wolves.

When Paul Reichmann of Olympia and York bought the old Toronto Star property, now the site of First Canadian Place, he showed up to make the offer with only his broker, Toby Arnold at his side. Across the table sat Star then-publisher and president Roland Hodderich, flanked

by half a dozen advisers and executives.

Those days are long gone, Mr. Hutchison says. Today, the most common approach is to assemble teams of professionals representing a wide range of disciplines.

"Good management tells you that a wider diversity of skills and views delivers a better decision," he says. "Traditionally, real estate has had a male-dominated, locker room mentality. It is one of the last industries to begin reflecting society as a whole."

Despite the slow progress in the commission-based sector, the industry as a whole has made enormous leaps forward, says Sheila Forster, executive vice-president of Royal LePage Advisors Inc.

"We are now at the stage where there are a good number of women in very senior positions in most areas of the industry," she says.

Ms. Forster cites as examples Kelly Harder, president of Summit REIT Property Management Ltd., Maureen Fedoruk, executive vice-president of property management at OBY Enterprise, Pam Spackman, president of Colman Canada Financial Corp. and Susan MacLaurin, a senior vice-president at GWL Realty Advisors Inc. A major factor driving the change in attitudes in commercial real estate has been ownership of commercial real

estate by institutions like insurance companies and pension funds, says Margo Friedman, director of e-business and corporate communications at CB Richard Ellis. During the past 20 years, she has been both a broker and a developer through a family-owned company.

"When the institutions began acquiring commercial real estate after the meltdown of the early 1990s, they brought with them a culture that was much more conducive to and supportive of women," she says.

The roots of change can be traced back to Canadian banks, says CREW's Ms. Mowbray. Banks have been in the forefront when it came to recognizing and promoting competent women, she says.

"When the banks took over investment brokerages, they brought those enlightened attitudes with them. Brokerages changed because the owners disowned it," she explains.

The same happened with the management, leasing and operations of commercial properties. Institutions bought them and brought along their more enlightened culture. That has yet to happen with real estate brokerages.

A more enlightened corporate culture may not be the only factor promoting the rise and importance of women, says Paul Finkebeiner,

president of GWL Realty, which controls \$6.5-billion in assets across Canada. He suggests the growing professionalism has been a major draw.

"I think women are attracted today because this is a stable, expanding and evolving industry," he says.

In the end, the decision of who to hire and who to promote now comes down to making the best business decision, says Victoria Foley, vice-president and business operations manager for the Braemar Financial Real Estate Group. "That is the real test," she says. "The industry has changed. Decisions have to be supported by facts, not emotions or prejudices. If a woman is the best candidate, then you simply must go with her."

Everywhere except in commission-based sales, Royal LePage's Ms. Barry adds.

"There is still not a lot of opportunity for women in this field," she says.

"You have to remember the change in attitudes is a recent phenomenon. Here in Calgary, the city's top business club, the Petroleum Club, only started admitting women members in 1989.

"We may have made a good start but there is still a long way to go in some areas."

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